THE CHURCH IN THE CITY

Saint Chrysostom's Church
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John Buchanan, Pastor

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

What a time to be a city church!

Every day city churches encounter situations and challenges that are unique and which simply do not exist elsewhere.

I sometimes think that we are on the frontier.

If frontier is that line that divides the known from the unknown, the border between the safety and security of the familiar patterns and the exhilaration and adventure and risk of the unknown, then urban churches are the end of the 20th Century version of frontier ministry.

How to be a church in the city?

There was something about his voice. It came through the intercom of the Manse next to the church, urgently, painfully. When you work in a city church you hear, before very long, every conceivable story created, rehearsed, told and retold in order to separate you from a few dollars.

This voice penetrated my own defense perimeters. I went to the door and saw a young man in torn and dirty clothing. His face was bruised and puffy, and he was shivering. It was not particularly cold. He did not ask for money or food. All he wanted was a sweater so he could stop shivering. So I did what we all know we should do under those circumstances. I referred him to our Social Service Center around the corner and returned to the game on television. Just as I sat back down I recalled two things: one, it was 5:30 p.m., and the Social Service Center closes at 5:00 p.m. on Saturday; and two, a wedding was about to begin in the chapel. So I hurried over to the church and sure enough, there he was, standing at the side door near the chapel, the one that is locked, pounding, trying to look through the windows. Inside there were people in tuxedos and lovely dresses engaged in a very important and very happy religious ceremony.

The church staff was caught between the two events: the lovely wedding about to begin and the man standing outside the door, with his face all puffy and bruised, shivering, wanting a sweater. The resolution was simple enough. The receptionist and I went down to the Share Shop, found a sweater and a wool sport coat. I took them up to the man and gave them to him. He was overjoyed, put them both on, thanked me profusely and walked up Chestnut Street.

As I watched him make his way through the small cafe tables outside Cricket's, full of fashionable people with shopping bags from Bloomingdale's, Marshall Fields, Lord & Taylor, enjoying a late afternoon drink, I felt guilt, exasperation, anger, frustration. The church can't interrupt a wedding every time a homeless person or an addict or a drunk looking for some guilt-ridden, middle class bleeding heart to finance another bottle of Muscatel pounds on the door. Nor can I play savior to every person with a hand out on Michigan Avenue, not to mention the ten or fifty thousand homeless people on the streets, depending on whose numbers you believe, not to mention millions of hungry people in the country and world. So I watched him walk away from the church, where the processional had

now begun, with his discarded wool sweater and sport coat, threading his way through the cocktail crowd at Cricket's — still shivering by the way — and I found myself wondering.

Urban ministry is like that. The city is like that.

Harvey Cox has written the forward to a fine collection of essays, *Envisioning The New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry.*

Cox, who has spent his career in cities, he says, has been mugged in Chicago, burglarized in Boston, nearly asphyxiated in Mexico City, interrogated in Berlin and hopelessly lost in Tokyo, still loves the city.

Cox quotes the German playwright, Berthold Brecht, who remarked that while Shelley thought hell was a place rather like London, in his own opinion it was probably much more like Los Angeles. [p. 13]

The City as Hell. In that same book, Jim Wallis tells about his sister and her five-year-old son Michael, walking through their Washington, D.C. neighborhood on the way to the Sojourners Day Care Center, where burned-out buildings and vacant lots remain from the 1968 riots. "Riot Corridor," it is still called. Michael looked at his mother and said, "Mommy, was there a war here?" [p. 44]

Urban problems have reached gargantuan proportions. Columnist William Raspberry wrote that the problem of homeless poor people is so complex, so multi-layered, so multi-faceted, so hopeless that he has noticed his own capacity to care shutting down. It's called "Compassion Fatigue."

You know the litany: city schools are bad, public housing is awful, gang violence, drugs, social destruction, family disintegration.

Alex Kotlowitz wrote about it in *There are No Children Here:* the story of a family trying to make it in the Henry Horner Housing Project and in particular two boys, Pharoah and Lafayette Rivers and their mother.

Listen to Kotlowitz describe an incident in their lives:
Bird Leg, their friend, fifteen is dead, shot on a playground on a hot August night by a rival gang member. At the funeral Pharoah and Lafeyette are sitting in a pew with their family. Someone sang, "Lean On Me."

> "Large tears slid down Pharoah's plump cheeks. He clutched his rolled-up sweatshirt to his chest for security.
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> "As the service closed and the mourners moved forward to pass the casket, Pharoah, still gripping his balled-up sweatshirt, asked Lafeyette,
> 'What's up in heaven? Do they have stores?'
>
> "'Shut up,' Lafeyette said. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'
>
> "As the boys waited to file out, they heard a mother, two rows back, scold her son, 'That could have been you if I'd let you go over there.'
>
> "'We're gonna die one way or the other by killing or plain out,' James said to Lafeyette. 'I jus' wanna die plain out.' Lafeyette nodded.
> 'Me too.'" [p. 48-51]

Since that book was published, Dantrell Davis was shot at Cabrini-Green; children have been dropped from windows; beaten and burned and we are on the way to a record number of murders.

There is in our cities a lethal combination of forces which is creating an urban problem so large we can no longer even see the entire picture: poverty, drugs, violence, crack, despair, gangs, assault rifles. And beneath it all, what appears for all the world like a massive, unconditional political surrender, the federal government hands urban

problems to the state. States are notoriously broke, and so they hand them to the city itself. At all three levels people get elected by promising to cut spending and never raise taxes, by looking to the private sector, which responds with some justification that its primary business is business - commerce - not urban violence, education and health care.

Which leaves the churches. We have refused to think in new ways about drugs and gangs and guns. There are not enough police, not enough courtrooms, not enough jails to begin to win the vaunted war on drugs we declared and have already lost. Because of poverty, despair, and drugs, an enterprising child in Cabrini- Green will look out at the world and make some basic decisions. An eight-year-old "watcher" on a bicycle, keeping a lookout for police, earns $50 a day. A twelve-year-old can earn twice that much making a few deliveries.

We could, of course, do it better. Maybe churches have to be brave and willing to think about ways to take away the profitability and the guns. We know the things that make for peace. We could be better. We could build a city that cares for its least, that shelters its homeless, that tends to its sick and educates its children. But it will require a new way of thinking. And it will require sacrifice and money, and toughness.

When he came finally to the city Jesus, I think, was showing where religion is to be focused.

Professor Glenn Tinder, in *The Political Meaning of Christianity,* observed that we want to keep spirituality separate from the more complex areas of our lives:

> "We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that it is hard to think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality." Tinder says, "the notion that we can be related to God and not to the world — that we can practice a spirituality that is not political — is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

Our Lord came to the city — not the retreat center, monastery or cloister, but the noisy, wonderful, tragic, glorious heart of the city.

Somewhere in each of us, I suppose, is a wish that he hadn't done that. I think part of the enormous appeal of the suburban megachurch is our desire to keep our God safely transcendent, to keep our Lord in the pleasant, rolling hills of Galilee, to keep our own religion confined to the church sanctuary on Sunday morning. And that might be a tenable position to assume, except for the fact that Jesus himself concluded his earthly life in the city.

In Harvey Cox's forward which I cited earlier, he says that what moves him most about the church in the city is its hopefulness. Not superficial optimism, but hope based on the experience which the church has that the people of God are still alive in the city — people who know a Christ who walks the city streets.

What can be done; can anything?

- We can, first of all, follow our Lord who came to the city, by at least not abandoning it. We — St. Chrysostom's and Fourth Presbyterian Church — can encourage our sister church in the suburbs to join us, in some urban ministry. We can continue to tell the stories.

- As individuals, and corporately, we can begin to speak and act publicly in an way that works realistically for the political change that will reverse the current structures that force cities to deal with regional problems without the benefit of regional taxation.

So long as there is an enormous disparity between what we spend on the education of our children, for instance, it will be difficult for people to remain in the city.

- We can become advocates for the public sector.

Professor Sumner observed that historically when Americans get enough money they seek to improve their private spaces. When Europeans get money they seek to improve public spaces and services.

The massive privatization of America life occurs at the expense of the public.

As more and more people pay for private security, public security declines: apply the paradigm to transportation, recreation, education, the arts. All of which, uninterrupted, tends to concentrate the poor, those unable to pay for private services in cities, which, because the most capable live elsewhere, are less able to pay for those services.

- And we can use our 2,000 years of experience to teach us how to be church on this frontier — this new mission field.

Old patterns don't work: mainline denominations have too much real estate, too many deteriorating buildings and too few of the old congregations willing and able to maintain them. And so a pattern: congregation declines — building deteriorates — more money is needed for the building — congregation continues to decline, can't afford a full-time pastor or the pastor it can afford is not particularly equipped for this frontier, decline continues.

Now, wouldn't it be something if we could be creative — and convert some of our real estate into cash, and hire a team of urban missionaries and then do something like the Methodists and Baptists did on the frontier or you and we did in China — send them "out" put them in the field, and let them go live in Jesus Christ and proclaim Lordship of Jesus Christ and see what happens ...?

And we can become sensible about the Unity of Church and unimportance — in mission, of our traditional differences ...

There is no Church Federation in Chicago. But there are two ecumenical structures: the Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries and Central City Housing Ventures (CCHV) Both need us.

And we can keep on keeping on — challenging our people to love and serve the city —

in programs which deal with hunger, homelessness, addiction, crime —

in social services ... in the name of the one who said whoever gives a cup of cold water in my name, does so to me.

I'm hopeful because I see in our city a new hunger and thirst for meaning. I see young adults in worship, volunteering, wanting to make a difference.

I see new interest in spirituality, prayer, spiritual growth, Bible study, journaling ...

I'm hopeful because people like you, at St. Chrysostom's, keep on keeping on ... Celebration for 100 years God's loving presence in this neighborhood.

And, finally, I'm hopeful because unlike other institutions struggling with their future, we're not in this alone.

We've been at it for 2,000 years.

This enterprise does not ultimately belong to us. It is Christ's Church — his project.

Our task is to be faithful: to live our lives, individually and corporately, for him and for the world he loved.

We are to be his people with our heart, mind, soul, and strength — with our imaginations, creativity, energy and love — with a kind of joyful abandon. The rest is up to him.